

Did Comedy kill the philosophy star?

Ian Ruffell

How much of a distortion was the picture in *Clouds*?

The history of Old Comedy is written in blood. Or so says Plato. In his version of Socrates' defence speech, the *Apology*, he pins the death of Socrates in 399 B.C. firmly on Aristophanes' *Clouds*, first performed a quarter of a century earlier. If we are to believe Plato, the prosecution and conviction of Socrates depended both directly and indirectly on the caricature presented in that and other plays. The bulk of Socrates' speech, as presented, is an attempt to counteract the jurors' exposure to these comic portraits when young and impressionable.

Plato here anticipates modern debates about the effects of popular culture on its audience, debates from which comedy has hardly been exempt. It isn't just a matter of hackneyed charges about sex, violence and bad language. Monty Python's *Life of Brian* was attacked as blasphemous. More recently, the full and frank critique of censorship campaigns in *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut* led, with acute irony, to just the sort of campaigns that it satirises ('comedy from the smoking pits of hell' according to The CAP Report - <http://www.capalert.com/capreports/southpark.htm>). But standard arguments about artistic freedom find jokes hard to deal with. Just how can we take comedy seriously? Plato's extravagant claim that comedy killed Socrates offers us a way to address, though perhaps not to resolve, these issues.

Plato's agenda

On the face of it, Plato's claim seems tempting. After all, *Clouds* ends with the lynching of Socrates and the destruction of his school. But Plato is, as ever, pursuing his own agenda. The *Apology* does not just defend Socrates' life and brand of reasoning, it defends the practice of philosophy itself. The prosecutors are depicted as representing the three established forms of public expression – politics, poetry and art – ganging up on philosophy. They have been annoyed, Socrates argues, because philosophy tells the truth and they do not. In this way Plato sets philosophy against, and above, the three principal ways in which moral and political ideas were spread in Athens. Plato is here not just fighting for space within which philosophy can operate and can claim a value and relevance, he is also staking a claim to philosophy's superiority and authority. Plato sets philosophy up as an underdog – the individual outsider against entrenched institutions (in fact, philosophers had the ear of the elite throughout the fifth and fourth centuries).

To reinforce this attack on his rivals' truth-telling, Plato offers the more specific argument against poetry and art that they are crafts – crafts that are about entertainment and inspiration, not information and education. We are used to the notion of art for art's sake, but Plato is operating in the face of the general assumption in classical Athens that poetry and art could and should inform and instruct. One fifth-century anti-democratic pamphlet (Ps.-Xenophon, *The Constitution of the Athenians*) presents the role of comedy as one of crude social control: the people, it claims, do not allow themselves to be criticised, but are happy for wealthy and powerful individuals to be attacked. Plato takes up this idea of comedy as abuse, and tries to divorce it from other forms of poetry. He firmly ignores any positive elements either to the slander or to the other imaginative qualities of comedy.

The Socrates of *Clouds* seems at first sight very different from the Socrates painted by his disciples, Xenophon and Plato. The doctrines espoused by the comic Socrates are a mish-mash of different theories kicking around in the fifth century. He lives in a community and follows mystic doctrines, reminiscent of Pythagoreans and related thinkers such as Empedocles. He engages in the sort of speculation about the physical world familiar from various early Greek thinkers, and in the rhetoric associated with the freelance teachers we now call 'sophists'. Certainly, this does not fit with the picture that Plato is usually said to portray, the picture of a Socrates who exposing the contradictions in other people's arguments, but does not put forward anything himself.

But there are more parallels between Aristophanes' Socrates and Plato's Socrates than Plato admits. In the dialogue called the *Phaedo*, set in Socrates' last hours, Socrates admits that in his youth he was interested in the theories of Anaxagoras – a theorist who amongst other things talked of a cosmic vortex (satirised as the divine Dinos of *Clouds*). Nor are mysticism and the influence of Pythagoras alien to the Platonic Socrates. In the *Apology*, for example, Socrates defends his concept of a divine spirit, *daimonion*, guiding his work. There are several works of Plato in which Socrates does himself push some central idea, but even if we just consider Socrates the inquisitor, those clever-clever moves made by the Weaker Argument in *Clouds* are only a short step from the critiques handed out to all-comers by Socrates. All of this would be more than enough for an audience who saw him questioning people in the market place and did not know what went on in the houses of the rich and famous – and any comedian worth his salt would know it was enough.

In trying to understand the relationship between the Socrates of *Clouds* and the 'real' Socrates it is vital to consider the play as a whole. However much Socrates may be implicated in the new education, there is no suggestion at all in *Clouds* that the old education was without problems. The benefits of the old education, as set out by the lecherous 'Stronger Argument', seem to consist of voyeurism and the chance of a quick grope at the gym. Worse than that, when he is confronted by the verbal trickery of the new rhetoric this product of traditional education can respond only with lame mythological examples and an unthinking nostalgia. It is 'Weaker Argument' who wins the argument, and the capitulation of 'Stronger Argument' is only the culmination of a pathetic performance. We might say, then, that the two products of the two systems of education are set against each other in order to take each other apart. The point is not to encourage nailing philosophers up, but to get the audience to think about the function of education, and how to find a way between the smug poles of a hypocritical, simplistic moralism and a self-interested, irresponsible sophistication.

If Aristophanes is suggesting that there is a 'winner' in this educational competition we might wonder about the claims not of the old education, nor of the new, but of comedy itself. After all, comedy is never shy of claiming that it can educate through its mix of flexible thinking, absurdity and political self-consciousness...

How influential was Aristophanes?

Some would claim that Old Comedy had no influence on the political scene in any case. Their chief witness is Cleon. Aristophanes and his fellow comedians abused Cleon savagely in the 420's, but he continued to be elected general and was at the height of his power when he died in battle in 422. How, then, could we accept the much longer and weightier reach that Plato claims for *Clouds*? If only life were that simple! Analysis of popular culture today suggests that the relationship between popular representation and political effect is not at all straightforward. A direct response to a single play is not credible, but that does not mean there was no effect.

A much better parallel for the case of Socrates is that of Cleon's predecessor as the darling of the people, Pericles. Comedians abused Pericles heartily throughout his lifetime, attacking specific policies and persistently presenting him as a tyrant and as a man who acted as if he were Zeus. But only when the Peloponnesian War started hurting did these attacks have any effect. At that point, in 430 B.C., the full weight of comic capital was cashed in, and the attacks on Pericles became effective. In Plutarch's gossipy *Life of Pericles* we get a picture of a crescendo of abuse, taking its cue from comedy and leading to his downfall. We might compare the satirical attacks on Margaret Thatcher throughout the 1980's that only really had an effect as she showed other signs of weakness. In this case, too, the language and imagery associated with her downfall drew heavily on the preceding decade of comic attacks.

You cannot be serious (can you?)

Once we bring in Aristophanes' rival comic poets, we can see a further strand of Plato's tricky strategy. For although he concentrates on *Clouds*, he also claims that it was the way other comedians repeated the allegations that did for Socrates. So why doesn't he address these nameless other plays rather than Aristophanes' play which only managed third place on its first appearance? One answer might be that *Clouds* was the only play in which Socrates himself was the principal character and not just one of a bunch. But we should also take note of the way in which Plato makes use of Aristophanic images taken out of context, particularly the image of the nutty professor hanging in a basket. By playing up this individual joke Plato plays down the systematic nature of the humour. More than that, Plato directs attention away from the more dangerous allegation that comedy repeated about Socrates, the allegation that he hung out with the rich and indolent, sponged off them and influenced their kids. In comedy those children turn into the father-beaters, in reality they grew up into the capricious, self-serving Alcibiades and the fascistic Critias, who was responsible for much of the brutal violence during the régime of the Thirty Tyrants that took over when Athens lost the Peloponnesian war.

As always in a defence speech, what is not said is as significant as what is said. In the *Apology*, it is the public philosophising of his teenage fanclub that Socrates defends. When it comes to talking about politics, and in particular the Thirty Tyrants, all he talks about is his own personal role. Plato downplays Socrates' longstanding association with key political players. Modern scholars tend to think that the charges against Socrates are best understood as revenge on a convenient scapegoat for the events under the Thirty Tyrants. The comedians' persistent and damaging allegations about Socrates' relationships with Athenian high society would bear directly on the case.

So it may well be that Plato, for all his spin, is right: comedy did kill the philosophy star. All it required was the opportunity to exploit the foundations laid by a quarter-century of satire. Although *Clouds* cannot be straightforwardly read as an attack on Socrates or an invitation to vigilantism, the trial of Socrates does not represent the triumph of a misreading. Comedy had put into circulation a particular caricature of Socrates that could be

duly exploited by the prosecution. No matter how partial their interpretation, the prosecutors were picking up on genuine aspects of the literary representations – the very aspects which Plato himself chooses least to emphasise. So too, although the Python team strenuously, and rightly, deny that *The Life of Brian* is blasphemous, they have done such a good job of sending up (early) Christianity and religious belief in general that the effect is much the same. The original and pure intention on the part of the writer or production team is beside the point. The reception of comedy may be beyond their control, but writers of comedy must take some responsibility for the effects of the caricatures that they put into circulation. Comedy may not have directly killed Socrates, but it almost certainly ground the hemlock and loaded the bowl.

Ian Ruffell has just been appointed to a lectureship in Classics at Glasgow University.

For useful study notes by John Porter on Aristophanes in general, *Clouds* in particular, and the Platonic dialogues concerning the Socrates' last days):

<http://www.usask.ca/antharch/cnea/CourseNotes/>

For a good brief account of Spitting Image:

<http://www.mbcnet.org/ETV/S/htmlS/spittingimag/spittingimag.htm>

For by far the best satire on the web: The Onion

<http://www.theonion.com/>